

Amanda Blasko:

Welcome to the NCJA Podcast. Listen to lively discussions with a variety of guests about promising criminal justice practices and programs worth taking a closer look at, your interesting ideas from around the country on a variety of important and timely topics, and learn how you can adjust or adapt your Byrne JAG grant program for improved success. Thanks for joining us. We hope you enjoy.

Anica Stieve:

Hello everyone and welcome to another episode of NCJA Podcast. Today we're diving into the juvenile justice world, to explore youth assessment centers. We have a special guest, Molli Barker Cook, executive director of the National Assessment Center Association. Today, Molli will fill us in on the work of the association and discuss key components of the assessment center framework and its implementation.

Welcome, Molli. Thank you for being here with us today. Would you mind briefly introducing yourself?

Molli Barker Cook:

Sure. Thanks, Anica. My name is Molli Barker-Cook. I am the executive director for the National Assessment Center Association and have been in this role since its existence, so about five years. Prior to that I was the executive director of the 18th Judicial Juvenile Assessment Center serving the 18th Judicial district in Colorado.

Anica Stieve:

Great, thank you for that. We were just recently in around the 18th Judicial District last week at an event, and we learned a little bit about assessment centers there.

Before we get started, it would be great if you could give us a brief overview of the Youth Assessment Center model. What is a youth assessment center and when did this model originate?

Molli Barker Cook:

Sure, yeah. The assessment center model is not new by any means. It was developed in the mid-'90s, primarily with the support of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, OJJDP at the time, as well as a couple national partners. It was piloted in two communities in Florida and two communities in Colorado initially. It really was designed to create, at the time it was called single point of entry, we now call it single point of contact, but it was really in response to a couple different things at the time in the '90s, an increase in youth crime and inappropriate use of detention.

This frustration that we have to get kids and families involved in systems in order to get them access to services, a frustration that from the time that a young person is interacting with law enforcement and the timeframe that the juvenile justice system takes to when we were actually putting services in place was weeks, months, so there was quite a delay between when youth and families were actually getting help, and just frustration with fragmented systems, lack of communication, lack of coordination. That's really why assessment centers were developed.

You'll see, especially if you can look back at OJJDP bulletins at the time, it was originally termed community assessment center and the juvenile justice system is the one that kind of ran with it, which is why you'll hear a lot of juvenile assessment centers, especially in the '90s, that's what it was termed.

The initial concept, and I know we'll get into specifics here a little later, but the initial concept was to really centralize young people that were interacting with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system, and maybe not centralized might not be the right word, but allow for a single point of contact, a single point of entry so that there is a streamlined way to divert those young people and to get them instead connected to community-based supports. By allowing that, we can develop eligibility criteria, really catch those kids that don't need to, one, go to detention, but two, don't need to enter the juvenile justice system, period. It was really a way for a coordinated effort for that to happen. It's evolved over time. Anica, I don't know if you want me to go into that now, but that's really how it started.

Anica Stieve:

Great. Thank you for that overview. That's really helpful. It sounds like assessment centers and the assessment center model can be adaptable and tailored to individual community needs. As you say, it's evolved over the years. Are there some consistent components across assessment centers or particular things that are aligned even as they differ across communities?

Molli Barker Cook:

Yeah, I'll touch on how they've evolved first because I think that that's helpful before we talk about what the kind of key components are. That was how they started in the '90s, the evolution now for a lot of communities... In the '90s, it started at post-arrest. Once young people were arrested, then there was a single point of contact that they would move through in order to identify diversion and prevention opportunities. As they've evolved, the field has really moved to be more preventative in nature. So why do we have to wait until young people are arrested in order to help streamline access to community-based resources and supports? So they're really moving, partnering with law enforcement for pre-arrest kind of diversion opportunities, partnering with schools as alternatives to your more punitive disciplinary actions,

addressing chronic absenteeism, all the way to as preventative as it can get to allowing youth and families to self-refer.

So they're serving as this hub in a community, not only for young people that are arrested, but all young people that really have some kind of concern or are rising to a level where somebody has identified a concern to help get youth and families connected to community services.

The one thing I will say when we talk about the core components that's important is an assessment center is a connector. They're not a service provider. I think that that's really important. Their role is to understand what the needs of youth and families are, what the strengths are that can be leveraged, and how do we get them connected to what already exists within a community. That neutrality is important so that there's no conflict of interest of where those referrals are going. So that, when we talk about assessment centers all across the country, that's I would say a foundational structural piece of an assessment center.

The key components or the core components is what we call them in the assessment center framework, there's three process core components. One is a single point of contact. Essentially that speaks to the referral process in to an assessment center. So who is using that assessment center as a single point of contact? At what decision points? What kind of policy surrounds that? A lot of the times police are changing policy, courts, prosecutor's office are changing policy, schools are changing policy in order to allow that assessment center to serve as the hub. So that single point of contact.

The second core component is screening and assessment. So really utilizing motivational interviewing, core building skills, family engagement skills, implementing evidence-based screening and assessment tools to identify strengths and needs.

Then the third core component is case management or that connection to care, that navigation component. So those are when we look at assessment centers across the country, they're called different things. They're not all called assessment centers, which I think is really important for the audience to know. You'll see them called resource centers, diversion centers, connection centers, and then just to make things even muddier, they're not called any of those. They're really named by local communities, which I think is great. So you have The Bridge in Boise, Idaho. You have The Harbor in Las Vegas. You have The Front Porch in Savannah, Georgia. So they could have none of those in their name, but what we are really looking for is that they're following those core components.

Anica Stieve:

Thank you. I love the name, The Front Porch. It's really great. And I like the idea that communities can create something that represent who they are and who's being served there. And that's a really helpful distinction to think through that the assessment center is not the service provider, but it's rather the connector and the entity that serves as a bridge.

So now that we know a little bit about the assessment center model and that these are in existence in operation across the country in different communities, can you help listeners understand the role and work of the National Assessment Center and what you all do there? How was the center formed and how does the center interface with localities using the assessment center model?

Molli Barker Cook:

Yes. Yeah, so the National Assessment Center Association was formed in late 2019, early 2020. Several assessment center directors from around the country really came together, including myself, because what happened... So in the '90s, the initial thought and concept was developed, and then really over the course of 30 years, there was no national coordination or support for assessment centers. So a couple things happened over those 30 years. What we saw was organic growth. We saw other communities would go visit an assessment center here, another assessment center here, kind of go back and create their own version of it. And 30 years of that really brought a wide continuum to what assessment centers are, kind of the language that we used. And so there was a lot of need for the field to come together to make sure that we were speaking some of the same language, that we were learning from each other, that we were implementing best practice. So that's really the genesis of the association and why it was created.

At this point, the association does a couple different things. One, we support the development of new assessment centers and provide some technical assistance to existing assessment centers in terms of expansion of population served, kind of quality, continuous quality improvement efforts, training of staff. So we do provide some technical assistance both in the development of new centers and expansion of existing centers. Most importantly is we bring the field together to learn from each other. So we hold a lot of networking opportunities both in person and virtually. And we also put out best practice publications and guidance.

So one of the first things that we did when we launched is in the '90s, the guidance for assessment centers were about three pages long and very broad, which is hard to start a model with just that. And so we pulled assessment center leaders, we pulled field experts, we pulled youth and families that had been

impacted by the justice and child welfare systems all together to update what is now called the Assessment Center Framework. It's a 65 page document that really lays out what the core components are, what the best practices are within assessment centers so that the communities can develop assessment centers on their own with the resources that the association is putting out. And they've got some materials and some guidance to lean on.

So best practice development training, technical assistance, facilitating networking opportunities, all of those are things that the association is doing to support the field.

Anica Stieve:

Wow, that sounds really helpful. So for communities who may be interested in implementing this model or establishing a youth assessment center what, in your opinion, are the key most significant benefits?

Molli Barker Cook:

Yeah, the reasons why I mentioned in terms of why communities started assessment centers in the '90s, the system frustrations, wanting to be more preventative in nature, establishing diversion pathways, all of those still exist today. All of those are a lot of the reasons why communities reach out to establish assessment centers today. I think most significantly there's, or I would say there's probably two buckets, if you will, that are the biggest benefits of assessment centers within the communities.

One is that we are creating the off-ramps to systems preventatively as a diversion mechanism or even as an early intervention. Still if they're moving through some of the juvenile justice system processes, assessment centers can still serve as that quick connection to community. So the development of off-ramps I think is probably one of the most enticing reason that a communities would be seeking out an assessment center.

But then also when you're developing that off-ramp and you're serving as the connector, it's streamlining access to community-based supports and really pulling the service provider community together. So you're not only pulling kind of your system stakeholders together to establish off-ramps, but you're pulling your assets and your community together to get youth and families connected. So I think both of those simultaneously are huge benefits to communities that are starting assessment centers.

Anica Stieve:

And so it sounds like in pulling the service providers in, you'd be seeing probably a dual benefit, one being that you're finding a better fit service for people who are being served, and then two, you're also leveraging more resources and creating more capacity for service and avoiding duplication of work. Is that fair?

Molli Barker Cook:

Yeah, absolutely. I think an example that I often give is you've got... What happens in a lot of communities is that you have a young person or a family that's struggling and the person that's interacting with that young person and family is making an off-the-cuff referral. This is the organization that I know of, this is where I think you could benefit. We haven't done a great job of taking a step back and really understanding what the needs and strengths are of that family. And so when we do that, it can be the wrong connection. And if we do that too many times, families experience service fatigue, and then we've lost that engagement piece. So I think being able to make that connection the first time to the right resource is going to increase engagement for youth and families, and minimize burden.

And the other piece is leveraging or maximizing the capacity of service providers. You're really making sure that service providers are getting youth and families who they're intended to serve, and so you're allowing them to do what they do best. I think it's a win-win on all accounts there, in my opinion.

Anica Stieve:

Thank you for elaborating on that. That's really helpful. When we think about impact, data driven decision-making is critical, and so I was wondering if you could talk a bit about how data can be or has been leveraged in assessment center work, either in terms of defining the target population that will be served or other components of the model.

Molli Barker Cook:

When communities are planning for an assessment center, doing the initial kind of planning and development process, we highly, highly, highly recommend that they go through what we call as a critical intervention mapping process, which is a data-informed process that allows the community to establish the target population of the assessment center. What we don't want to happen is for a community to go visit one assessment center and cut-paste because all things operate very differently from one community to the next. And so in that critical intervention mapping allows us to gather data from really key decision points. Schools, law enforcement, the district attorney or prosecutor's office, probation,

detention, all of the stops along the way for the juvenile justice system to better understand who is moving through those decision points, for what, what are the decision-making protocols, what are the existing tools that those stakeholders are able to access. And then from that, where does it make sense to plug in the assessment center as the off-ramp because that is going to look very different.

So using both quantitative data from those stakeholders, but also interviews, qualitative data, talking to folks that are doing the day-to-day to understand how decisions are being made and using that as a tool to make a decision for that specific community on where the assessment center is going to serve or who it's going to serve is really important.

Anica Stieve:

Great. So all of this sounds really compelling and makes me want to go out and start an assessment center. Can you discuss common challenges faced when implementing or operating an assessment center and then if there's any solutions. But I think it's helpful for folks to know some of the roadblocks that people might run into.

Molli Barker Cook:

I would say probably the most common challenge, because there's so much collaboration that needs to happen for an assessment center to be successful, both on the front end in terms of the referral in, really getting some of those key stakeholders to have buy-in, that the assessment center is going to service the hub, it requires policy change, it requires buy-in from those stakeholders, not only initially but ongoing. And I think that's probably just a continuous challenge that communities have because key people leave, you have turnover, especially if they're appointed or elected officials that are involved in the planning process or are now key stakeholder positions. That can be a challenge just in that stakeholder engagement.

The other piece that a lot of communities grapple or struggle with is identifying who is going to operate their assessment center because that looks different in different communities. You have assessment centers that are ran by 501(c)(3) nonprofits, you have assessment centers that are ran by county governments that are not connected with the judicial branch, and then some that are connected to the judicial branch. So it really just depends.

But those are, I would say the two things that most communities might struggle with, especially in that planning phase. But that stakeholder engagement, it's so crucial on the front end to have those players at the table. And it's a really good indicator, one on how quickly the planning process works, but also the sustainability of the assessment center.

Anica Stieve:

Thank you. I feel as though we both just had a mind meld because I was thinking just as you were talking about how communities would identify the entity or create the entity to house the assessment center. You talked earlier about the neutrality and why that's important. And so you just explained that without me asking the question. And I'm curious if you can elaborate a little bit more or maybe share some examples of a couple of different organizations that have housed the assessment center and how those have worked well or been challenging in your experience.

Molli Barker Cook:

I'll share some examples of how that works. I would lean on them to share their own challenges or what works well and what doesn't. But a couple examples.

So in Colorado, I think, Anica, you said that you all were just there in the 18th judicial district. They're now serving the 23rd judicial district. It is a 501(c)(3). It actually, the assessment center started out as a government entity and then after about 10 years of operation, they moved into a 501(c)(3) status. And so at this point, they have MOUs with law enforcement, with the courts, they have some state legislative funding. Schools provide funding to that assessment center and there's a whole bunch of MOUs and agreements that helps support that assessment center. But their sole purpose is to be an assessment center. They're not providing any other services or supports to youth and families. That is their charge.

In Memphis, Tennessee, they started an assessment center, Shelby County, I should say, they started an assessment center two years ago, and the decision was made to house that assessment center underneath their county community services division. So a part of the county but not a part of the judicial branch. They are located, I know they're constantly changing and they're actually exploring some other satellite sites, but the city provided them an old library and they renovated it, they gutted it, they made it their own, and they're in a highly impacted neighborhood. And for them, their population that they're serving is a partnership with law enforcement. They've specifically identified 14 offenses that would've traditionally gone through the juvenile justice system that are now going through the assessment center. And they have partnerships with the schools and they do youth and family walk-ins. So that's another example.

And then the other one that I'll share is the multi-agency resource center, which is in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana. That is an assessment center that is ran by the Office of Juvenile Justice. So that's one that is closely tied with the juvenile justice system, but is separate from their court and detention center and all of that. So all young people arrested go through the assessment center, but they also have a really strong

preventative arm and agreements with their schools and their child welfare agency to facilitate that single point of contact function.

That was one of each example that I gave. All of them are serving their community and great outcomes, all of them very different.

Anica Stieve:

That's really helpful and I think it helps folks conceptualize the different options of how it could look. And yes, like we mentioned for another event, we were in Colorado and we heard from some folks from the assessment center and got to see their space, and I found that really interesting to know that it had started as a government entity and then evolved into a nonprofit. And I think that's valuable for folks to know. So thank you for those examples.

So at NCJA, we work with state administering agencies who are interested in exploring innovative programs, of course with sustainable funding. So the big question that everybody struggles with is how would a community go about funding this? You talked a little bit about it in your example you shared with Colorado, but what are some other models or things that work well in terms of identifying funding or getting partners on board to contribute funding?

Molli Barker Cook:

So the funding of assessment centers looks different in every jurisdiction, but there are some common funding streams I would say. There are several states that at some level have state support for assessment centers. So for example, Idaho a couple of years ago passed some short-term, time limited legislative funding for the development of assessment centers. They've actually extended that support through I think even this year. So they've supported assessment centers statewide. Ohio, through their Department of Youth services supports the development of assessment centers. And then Florida, Kansas and Colorado all have some sort of legislation. It may or may not have funding tied to it depending on the state, but there's at least legislation that allows jurisdictions to use assessment centers within their processes.

Locally then, most assessment centers are funded in combination of county or local government funding. Juvenile justice and child welfare organizations will oftentimes provide funding to assessment centers, recognizing that they're saving them costs and contributing to the prevention of young people entering

their systems. There are a couple jurisdictions where law enforcement contributes to assessment centers and provides funding.

And then for those, specifically those that are functioning as a nonprofit, getting philanthropic grant funds, funds from foundations also is possible and is common. Depending on the state and the jurisdiction, some of them are able to bill either state Medicaid for screening assessment and case management functions or their targeted case management, or some sort of state Medicaid reimbursement for some of their services. It really depends and it runs the gamut. But I would say most commonly it's that local funding from the county, juvenile justice, child welfare.

Anica Stieve:

Okay, that's helpful. So ultimately, it sounds like there's a lot of strategies to piece together funding for this effort. That's good to know for folks as they think about ways to implement this or explore implementing this in their community in the future.

And I'm curious, so the association is a newer organization, you said 2019, 2020, have you or do you have plans to conduct any evaluations of assessment centers or any sort of longer term outcome evaluation to look at their effect over time or impact in the communities in which they serve?

Molli Barker Cook:

Yeah, so actually quite a few assessment centers have had outside evaluations done. It hasn't been a national coordinated effort, but a lot of local, they've kind of done their own effort to bring in an outside evaluators. So there are studies that'll show the effectiveness of assessment centers within their jurisdiction.

Just this last year, I should say 2023, the State Justice Institute funded the association to develop what we call Assessment Center Outcome Reporting Network that establishes common data indicators and outcomes and supporting the field in aligning with those. At this point, there's no, I would say wide scale evaluation happening, but more supporting individual assessment centers and what data metrics and outcomes to capture. And then obviously if they bring in an outside evaluator, we'll help support that effort too.

Anica Stieve:

SAA's are really interested in school-based prevention and intervention for young people. Molli, you mentioned the school-based component earlier, but I was wondering if you would elaborate on how that works. Are there any models or examples that other people should know about?

Molli Barker Cook:

There's a lot of assessment centers that have strong partnerships with their school districts. I would say the most common partnership and target populations for those partnerships are around chronic absenteeism or truancy, and then around disciplinary behaviors that would lead to disciplinary action. But I know that there are several assessment centers that have agreements with their school districts where when a child reaches the threshold that they're whatever that is locally, 10 absences, 15 absences, the school district automatically wraps in the assessment centers so that they can better understand why that child is missing school and what services would be helpful. So that is an example.

There's also jurisdictions, if there is a truancy court, that the assessment center is a part of that initiative to make sure that youth and families are wrapped with services and not just going through a court process.

For disciplinary action, the multi-agency resource center in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana is a good example of this. They have agreements with their school districts around vaping and fighting, and I believe drug and alcohol possession or use, and when there is a disciplinary or when there would be a disciplinary kind of reaction from the school, instead it's a referral to the assessment center. So again, all of that requires, ideally, a policy change so that it's not just one teacher, one using the assessment center.

In the 18th, we looked at data and looked at the disciplinary process or which schools had the highest level of suspensions, expulsions, absenteeism, and actually co-located a staff person from the assessment center within that school district so that they were a part of that team and could really support kids that are higher need. So all of those are possibilities. It just depends on how much the schools are at the table in certain jurisdictions and what resources the school already has versus when they need an assessment center to come in, compliment what they're doing.

Anica Stieve:

I have a follow-up question. We've talked about the center, but I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about who makes up the staff. What kind of folks are the people who are doing the work? And you mentioned it just a moment ago with this interesting school partnership, and I'm wondering if you can just talk a little bit more as people think about a young person going through an assessment center, who are they running into?

Molli Barker Cook:

Are you asking the qualifications of the staff?

Anica Stieve:

Are they practitioners? Are they youth mentor? Do people do different things?

Molli Barker Cook:

Great question. So we distinguish between two tiers of center. There's a tier one and a tier two, primarily to distinguish between the assessments that need a higher level of skill or experience. So a tier one assessment center is one that's really doing screenings. They're not doing kind of biopsychosocial assessments because they don't have that level of clinical staff. So if a young person is screening in or a flag is made on a screener, then they're wrapping in an outside organization to do the assessment.

A tier two assessment center is one that does have more clinical staff or a higher specialized staff that can do screening and an assessment if it's needed. What I will say is the connection piece, the navigation piece, that doesn't have to be done by the same person that's doing the assessment. And that's where we'll see a lot of assessment centers staff with navigators, credible messengers, peer specialists, whatever they're called within that community. But it can be any type of qualifications that is doing that care management function.

Anica Stieve:

Great, thank you. This has been really informative and I think as a follow up we may want to bring some folks from some of the assessment centers you mentioned to talk with us further about their experiences.

As a conclusion, is there anything else that you would like our listeners to know about assessment centers or anything you think would be a logical follow up for them if they want to learn more?

Molli Barker Cook:

Our website has a whole lot of resources publicly available, so if there's an interest in learning more, the most common resources I give out to folks is if you go to our website, which is nacassociation.org, there's the assessment center framework, there is a planning and implementation guide on there for those that are looking at what that process might look like, there are spotlights that really showcase different assessment centers and how they operate. It might be an inundation of resources, but that's a good place to start. And then if folks have questions, I just would just encourage them to reach out.

Anica Stieve:

Great. Well, thank you so much for being here today and helping us all better understand this really great progressive model.

Molli Barker Cook:

Thanks, Anica.